

The Star of this Story: Jesus
Ephesians 3: 1-12 and Matthew 2: 1-12
January 3, 2021
Eastminster Presbyterian Church

This starlit story in Matthew is about God using opposing forces to work good, it is about new discoveries; it is about seeing old lives in new ways; it is a story of hope that invites you and me to travel with the wise men to see what we learn about our own lives, but more importantly what they and we discover or re-discover about the love of God in Jesus Christ.

Herod, the one who rules Jerusalem by fear sits opposite Bethlehem where the angels sang out the message, “Do not fear!”

So, how did the people live in the balance? They lived in faith and in hope because they had the promise of a Messiah, a Savior! In our day and age bombs explode in recreational vehicles, cars plow people down on sidewalks, gunshots ring out in places of where people are supposed to be able to play, relax, enjoy; and yet, the message of faith and hope remains: Do not live in fear.

There is no denying that I cannot fully understand or appreciate the reality of fear. I live a privileged life in a privileged land. At least at this point in my life, my fear is nothing compared to others living under the rule of a modern-day Herod or worse. As a person of faith, I have a heart choice. When fear does creep into my faithful, human living, I can choose to resist its control over me. But, for persons who have never been told, never imagined, never experienced the kind of unconditional love I cling to in Jesus Christ, where is their choice?

To live in fear limits our vision and understanding of God’s kingdom here on earth and above; but to live in faith opens our eyes to new discoveries, new possibilities, new “a ha moments. Moments, we sometimes call epiphanies!

When we recall that the religious world into which Jesus was born tended to be private and often a closed spiritual world meant only for a few, this celebration of Epiphany becomes all the more important. The religion of Jesus’ day suggested that “finding God” meant being born into the “right” religion. Even a pagan converted to Judaism was not the right fit for early Judaism. Once in the religious system, one had to learn the proper way to eat, pray, wash, fast, and sacrifice. It was hard work to get close to God.

However, born into the right family, with the right position, at the right time gave you better odds at interacting with the Divine, so the in-crowd believed; but even then, following the letter of the law was a burdensome task.

And yet the story of Jesus’ birth reminds us that encountering the Holy is joyous, not burdensome, and it is an encounter all can experience. Considered to be on the bottom wrung of the social, economic, educational, and religious ladder of life, it was to the shepherds that the angels announced the birth of the Savior of the world. And of all the words the angels could speak, their message was clear: Do not fear!

When room was made for this child at the inn, he was already destined to make room for everyone in his heart, from the lowly shepherds to the dabblers in the deep mysteries of the heavens, stargazers from a foreign land, the wisemen. These Magi were the last people the religious in crowd thought deserved the star-in-the-east story. They were wealthy pagans, making an expensive trip, risking their fortunes and reputations, and in the mix of all that, their purpose was almost waylaid, and their lives threatened by a paranoid Herod.

What caused these men to step out in faith and take a risk? I suspect the same thing that causes us to do so, the presence of the Spirit in our hearts. As people of faith, we risk because we have the assurance of the guidance of the power of the Spirit within us. That Spirit calls us to look for new discoveries, to see the new within the old, to discover or re-discover the love of God in Jesus Christ.

That Spirit-led need to discover is at the heart of this story. The wise men had no idea what their journey and discovery would mean for the world. As we use and develop the gifts that God has planted within us and let go of the fear, our encounter with God may be more than we bargained for, and yet better than we ever expected.

Maybe like those magi from so long ago, our first calling is simply to be who we were made to be. And then to keep our eyes and ears and hearts open to moments when we are called to step out in faith, taking those God given gifts not where we wish, but where God wills---sometimes, stepping out of our comfort zone...lending hand and heart where we cannot imagine our gifts could be used. I dare say we have stepped into the uncomfortable and the unknown this year.

To see God at work in the world requires of us to embrace the tough stuff of life by way of faith and hope that the Christ child delivered to us long ago. Remembering to give thanks to God in the light and the dark of life requires that we open ourselves up for epiphanies, intentionally looking for God at work every day through the joys and the devastation of nature, through ordinary and extraordinary people like you and me, who have made the decision that Jesus is Lord of our lives, called not to ponder the question "what would Jesus do," but instead doing what Jesus did!

Luke says that poor shepherds come to kneel before the newborn king. For Matthew, wealthy astrologers come to bring gifts. But both the poor and the wealthy follow the same star. It is the same God who brings together the diverse, the spiritually elite or empty, the foreigner and the familiar. It is same God who says to the whole world, have faith, even in the midst of our fear.

So, come to this Table today. Those of us who are firm in our faith. Those of us who are faith-strugglers. Those of us more comfortable with the shepherd's story and those of us more at ease with the wise men's journey. Come to this Table today, our Lord says...just as you are, discovering or re-discovering the love of God in Jesus Christ and holding fast to faith and hope with these words spoken to Christians in Ephesus long ago and us today: How blessed is God! And what a blessing God is!

Long before God laid down earth's foundations, God had us in mind, had settled on us as the focus of love, to be made whole and holy by that love. Long ago God took pleasure in deciding

to adopt us into his family through Jesus Christ. Brothers and sisters in Christ, come as you are, the family meal is ready!